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SUBJECT: LEFT GAINS IN KEY MEXICO STATE ELECTION

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Although the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) appears to have won a narrow plurality in the March 12 Mexico state elections, the left-of-center Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) made impressive gains, easily displacing President Fox's National Action Party (PAN) as the second political force in the state, and weakening the hand of the PRI Governor. The PRD's gains were reflected both in its vote for the state congress and in the number of mayoralities it won. The PRI campaign undoubtedly suffered from the scandal over the apparent illicit enrichment of former state governor and PRIista Arturo Montiel (reftel). Yesterday's result adds to the PRD's momentum in the national election, while contributing to the impression that both the PAN and the PRI remain at a decided disadvantage. End Summary.

A Look at the Results -----

¶2. (U) At stake in the election were 125 municipal presidencies and 75 seats in the state congress, 45 chosen by direct election and 30 from statewide party lists. Although the PRI apparently emerged with a narrow plurality with respect to votes for the state congress, both it and the PAN lost considerable ground to the PRD. With approximately 97% of votes counted, the PRI and its alliance partner the Green Party (PVEM) together won 32% of the vote for the state congress; the PRD and its alliance partner the Labor Party (PT) followed close behind with 31%, with the PAN lagging at 26%. For purposes of comparison, in the 2003 state elections, the PRI won 35%, the PAN 29% and the PRD 24%. As for congressional districts, the PRI appears to have won 19 of 45 directly elected state legislators, 5 fewer than it held in the outgoing congress. The PRD increased its representation by 7 seats, to 17, and the PAN dropped 2 congressional seats, to 9. The 30 congressional seats elected from statewide lists will be distributed proportionately, according to the percentage of votes each party won.

¶3. (U) As for mayoralities, the PRI, alone and in coalition, won a total of 53 mayoralities, 15 less than it currently governs. The PRD alone won 24 mayoralities, for a gain of 1, but won an additional 12 in coalition with smaller parties. The PAN, won 25, for a net gain of one. Smaller parties and local parties won several mayoralities, and the results in several municipalities remain too close to call.

Apathy Rules the Day -----

¶4. (SBU) The PRI's weak performance may have been mitigated in part by the low participation rate, approximately 40.5% statewide. Most analysts concur that a low participation

rate favors the PRI, which has by the far the best organized get-out-the-vote machinery, capable of delivering a large number of loyal PRI voters to the polls regardless of overall turnout. Yesterday's low turnout may hold a cautionary tale for the PRI: having only barely managed to eke out a first place finish with low turnout working in its favor, it may be hard pressed to repeat even this result on July 2, when the turnout is likely to be much higher.

Electoral Officials Show Off a Professional Operation

15. (SBU) At the headquarters of the Mexico State Electoral Institute (IEEM), a festive atmosphere prevailed on election day. Local officials went out of their way to welcome "invited guests" from foreign embassies and NGOs, offering three catered meals as well as a raft of IEEM-monogrammed souvenirs. The IEEM gave the impression of running a highly professional and transparent operation, with outsiders allowed to observe the electoral tribunal's deliberations over complaints of electoral law violations. Although there were scattered complaints of small-scale fraud and electoral law violations during the day, IEEM officials assured us the scale of complaints was typical for an election in what is Mexico's most populous state. (Note: The press reported two shootings in connection with the vote. In one case, PRI activists apparently shot a person who was delivering meals to poll workers; they apparently believed he was a PRD activist seeking to buy votes with free meals. End note.)

Expectations vs. Spin

16. (SBU) Although PRI leaders sought to spin the fact that

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their party remained the largest political force in Mexico state, several party contacts told us last week that they would consider anything less than 35% of the statewide vote to be a significant setback. A PRI-affiliated political analyst told poloff today that while the PRI indeed had won a plurality of mayoralties in the state, many of these were in smaller cities. He observed that the PAN held on to the major economic centers in the state, whereas the PRD won several of the most populous cities, most notably wresting control of the largest, Ecatepec, from the PRI. He asserted that the big loser in the election was popular PRI Governor Enrique Pena Nieto, who won a landslide victory last year. Considered a PRI rising star and possible 2012 presidential candidate, Pena Nieto will have considerably less control over the incoming congress than he did over the outgoing congress, making it difficult to advance his agenda. Our contact noted that the PRD and PAN factions in the incoming congress will now be able to join forces to hold hearings on former Governor Montiel's apparent illicit enrichment while in office, to ensure that the PRIista's misdeeds stay in the limelight through July 2.

Comment: A Second Place Victory

17. (SBU) There is no question that the PRD's impressive performance in a state that traditionally has been a PRI stronghold represents a considerable setback for the PRI. Nevertheless, that party's spin machine may have some value, as the press has been portraying the PAN as the day's biggest loser, when in fact it lost considerably fewer congressional seats than the PRI, and actually gained a mayoralty. In our view, the bottom line on the Mexico state election is this: by finishing within one percent of the PRI, the PRD demonstrated that its surge in the polls -- dismissed by many as ephemeral -- indeed translates into considerable gains on the ground. Those in the traditional parties who were counting on their party's "voto duro" (loyal voters) to emerge from the woodwork on election day had best rethink their strategy.

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